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THE APRON STRING IN OUR THEATRE

BY STARK YOUNG

If you talk about an outside influence on an art, you must first be clear about the fundamentals of that art. To go very far into the relation of our theatre to the English, we must know first of all that the art of the theatre is an art to itself. It differs from every other art. We must know the sources from which it springs and the means—drama, setting, costume, acting, music—that make it up and that contribute to its ends, which are the expression of human living. We must know that in entering into this art every element, such as drama, costumes, action, becomes something that it was not before; drama is not literature, architecture is no longer architecture but translated into another art, and so with everything involved. The importance of a country in the theatre depends on how far it is endowed with means and methods and resources by which the art of the theatre as an expression of life is furthered.

The necessity for such an understanding at the very outset was borne sharply in upon me last spring. In a discussion of the season in New York, in an article in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, I touched in passing on a subject that needs talking about at more length, the importance of our theatre's getting away from the influence of the English theatre. This statement, with a very brief indication of the reasons for it, brought from Mr. St. John Ervine a delightful reply and an invitation through *The London Observer* for me to discuss the matter in greater detail at some future time. In his article Mr. St. John Ervine says that in his judgment I am on safe ground when I ask America to discover a drama of its own. To that one can only say, obviously, we should hope so. Mr. Ervine wonders if I am merely repeating the anti-Anglo-Saxon theories of Mr. Mencken; to which I reply that even if I had such a prejudice I should not indulge it at the expense of art. Well, that point being settled, then, Mr.

Ervine would like to know just what there can be in the theatres of other countries rather than the English that I want our theatre, if it turns to any foreign stage, to follow. Mr. Young, he says, finds the drama in England valueless in comparison with Russia, Germany, Italy or Spain. He wishes me to stoop to particulars from the heights of airy generalities and oblige him by naming the drama in all those countries which reduce English drama to the level of the neglige. Shakespeare and Shaw, he says, are being played in many places on the Continent; what is there better in the drama of Italy or Spain or Russia? And Mr. Ervine makes some American comparisons.

Well, to that I might say I know nothing better in those countries than Shakespeare and Shaw. But that is not the point at all. When he talks like that Mr. Ervine is doing exactly what nearly every other writer on the subject does. He does not talk of the art of the theatre and seems unaware that there is such an art. He gets off on to drama, which is only one element of this art; and for all that what he says about drama comes to, he might as well be talking of literature. And when I talk of the influence of one country's theatre on another I have no competitive interest in whether these theatres are better or not than our own. That sort of contest can reach no decisions except on the grounds of mere personal taste and prejudice. And I am not exactly talking about the occurrence of admirable instances of plays. I talk of qualities, resources. A country that is significant for our theatre will be one where there is manifestly a talent for and an abundance of one or more of these essential qualities. The whole discussion turns on that. How much resource has the English theatre for the expression of English living, of all living if you like? In England how much of the abundance of life wells up and speaks through the forms of the theatre? As for dramas, I mean not separate plays so much as the gift or possibility of expressing life in terms of the theatre. I mean not so much single instances of acting, but the possession of those attributes that go to make acting a complete and significant art. I mean not the mere occurrence of excellent settings, but the gift for expressing our visual experience in terms of the theatre and for making that expression significant.

The relation of our theatre to the English is an important subject. We have in America now no small impulse toward a theatre of our own. From many lands and peoples we have brought magnificent stores of characteristics to draw upon and infinitely diverse dreams and ways of living. We have natural conditions unlike those to be found anywhere else in the world, we have our own kind of energy, our own development of society, our own hopes of the future and judgment of the past, waiting to be expressed in an art of the theatre. For influences, if we choose, we have the whole world to turn to. How far our turning in the theatre to England is profitable or cramping, a profound need or a mere hang-over of colonialism, is a question to think upon.

In the first place there is no absolute necessity, of course, that the theatre of a country borrow anywhere. The primary need is that it develop out of its own kind. Soul is form and doth the body make, as Spenser said; the form of our art of the theatre will necessarily come out of what we have to express. In the end we shall have to find our own feet to stand upon. But the history of art is full of influences always; for that is the natural tendency of human art as of human beings. Influences, then, we have and shall have; and influences at their best may very well be our participation in the accumulated riches of the world. But an influence in order to count must come from a source dictated by our profoundest needs. It must not be a mere parental accident. We have leaned on the English theatre more because we chanced to be an English colony than because of any deep need of it.

Moreover, it does not follow that, because a race is gifted in one direction, it is necessarily gifted in another. The powers of a race, like a man's, may culminate in a complete expression of itself in one art and in another art may only stammer. The English race has, obviously, a talent for governing and for colonization, demonstrated the world over, and for developing a governing class. It has a talent for sports; and, I think, a talent for poetry, though I am aware that in saying so I should have to defend the racial conception of what the poetic is. But the English are not gifted to anything like the same extent in the theatre. And even if there were an adequate theatrical expression of Eng-

lish life, it does not follow that it would suffice for us. We are not pure English but many races, and we live under very different conditions. We may need England in many ways, commercially, culturally—and even for the Anglo-Saxon domination of the world, if one likes to cherish that rather self-complacent dream of things—and from the English we can learn much. But from their theatre we can get little. If it is better than ours that is because the culture, the social life, the literary elements that go to make it up are better, and not because of any essentially theatrical elements in it.

I know the objection that comes up immediately. It is exactly the kind of thing that one expects to come up in the discussion of any art by people who bring little thought or understanding to the fundamentals of it; just as a man may see the harmony of tone or the painstaking in a picture without in the least knowing what painting is. The objection is this: How much better the diction of English actors is than ours! How much better the manners of a company of English actors than of one of our companies! And that is very true. But the answer is simple. First of all, the diction and manner that people are talking about in these English companies is largely a negative thing. The excellence of it consists not so much in anything done as in what is not done; it is not so crude as ours, not so loud, not so vulgar. Second, diction and manners in any important sense are not mere pleasing reservations and harmonious discretions; they are things that contain in themselves a constructive abundance, they are elements of style, they have in them their own passionate intention and their revelation of proportion and meaning. The English theatre, unlike the French or the Tuscan, cannot be said to show any real talent for diction and manners as creative elements in the art of the theatre. Diction and manners, as we find them on the English stage, are scarcely art at all; they are only parts of the ordinary life of England and, as everyone knows, far from being standards of perfection, are actually below the level of the best social tradition. We may copy all this but there is little in it for us beyond mere imitation. And the imitation of English speaking would make a fool of the American stage in so far as that speech is unlike our own. But in Rome or Paris we have at least

a chance of finding a theatre in which diction and manner are seen as creative elements in an art. We need the influence of the theatres with a sense of the possibilities of words and manner as revelations of life, and a conviction of the necessity of cultivating them as means toward high and complete theatrical expression.

In the most lasting element of the art of the theatre, the drama, the English theatre, compared to that of other countries has nowadays little to teach us. Shakespeare, of course, belongs not only to the English but to all English speaking theatres, since Shakespeare's England no longer exists. And even Shakespeare handed on no dramatic form that later dramatists have been able to use. There seems to be a darkness and chaos at the very heart of his art that remains more or less unmanageable. But granting everything to Shakespeare, if you like, the fact remains that England is almost the last place to see him played. The renowned schools of Irving and Tree only botched him up; they prettified Shakespeare's magnificent intelligence and ungovernable current of life; and Forbes Robertson, for all his fine moments, played that favorite and stupid English trick where the classics are concerned, of turning everything into the Bible, which, whatever its virtues may be, is scarcely the Shakespeare of the seventeenth century. Leaving Shakespeare out of it, then, very much as we might leave out Spenser or Milton or Aristophanes, we turn to the English drama of later times. Meantime we must remember that we do not look just now at a drama for its special and unique merits. We look to it as a possible influence for our own; and such a possibility depends on the gift it shows for expressing its matter in terms of the theatre, and on its gift for form that is significant as a dramatic vehicle. In this sense there is always on the Continent a dramatist who is better than his English competitor in the same kind. Congreve, for all his fine ear and literary gift, is far inferior as theatre to Molière, as are Sheridan, Goldsmith and their like. Pinero in the same field of thought and life and method is nothing to Ibsen. Galsworthy, for all his poise and ease and his equable cricket, is a mild form of a dozen Continentals; by the side of Chekhov his realism is like an invitation to tea; by the side of Strindberg Galsworthy is like playing cribbage with the beadle. For a glowing and sensuous

rendering of the rich and tragic splendor of men and passions and cities, D'Annunzio has found the dramatic expression. The remarkable work of John Synge follows him at a distance. For the macabre and heroic and wilful and witty and romantic there is Benavente. Compared to what the Russians can say of life's warmth and grayness and depths of suffering, Stanley Houghton and the rest of the Manchester School of dramatists are like milking cows on a field of battle. These boasted Manchester realists have developed a kind of problem method of their own, no doubt; but they remain sterile in their monotony. They are like provincials arguing self-consciously before a Sunday School superintendent a question which the larger world has long since located and more or less settled and which can be treated now, if at all, only in terms of vigorous creation. Barrie is a delightful and adorable personage who can encourage us to be sweet and droll when we can and as we can; but Barrie is an influence better for our souls than for our theatre. Shaw has no respect for the theatre or for any other art in itself. He abounds in fine passages; he encourages us to talk and to put ideas into drama—from him we might learn how to let our drama have a little more brains and how to make what thoughts we have more lively and provocative. But with Shaw the theatre is more of a reformer's outlet and a theorist's mouth-piece than an artist's medium. His success is in talk and theory rather than in imaginative creation. Gilbert and Sullivan are English essentially. Their quality of humor is not ours, though we like it for a season now and then. In their direction we have already on the way to something of value our musical comedies and reviews, our jazz and follies; which, good or bad, are representative, in their spirits, their extravagant quantities and their accentuations, of a definite element in American life. Out of English drama nowadays there are numerous plays that we might enjoy if played in our theatre. But except for the literary element in the art of the theatre, about which Shaw and John Synge could teach us a good deal, there is little English drama that could bring us any dilation of our powers of expression or any revelation of new regions of living to be expressed.

An Englishman who starts out to be an actor struggles with certain racial traits that are handicaps to the art. He has first of

all a body that is not expressive; whereas an expressive and eloquent and magnetic body and gesture is the main focus of the art of acting. He distrusts the exhibition of feeling and prefers talking about emotion to showing it; whereas the ideal in acting is the achievement of a medium by which the life going on within can be exhibited, as a delicate scientific experiment is shown through glass. He dislikes the effect of calculation in anything, of pre-mediated craft. He prefers to think that things are sincere in the limited sense of being not thought out, though he knows how unlikely that must be; in a word the Englishman is afraid of conscious art. Whereas, in acting, the supreme style—as well as all secure technique—derives from a combination of sensibility and calculation, and moves toward an ideal of distinction with a touch in it of conscious elaboration.

The voice of the English actor compared to ours is a fine one. It is more even, a better tone, a better precision. But compared to the French or the Russian or Italian voice, the English is a very limited instrument. It is apt to be dry, to be cramped in the throat, and too self-conscious for the greatest effects, in tragedy especially. It suits admirably the one thing in which English actors do really excel, their social comedy. But the English voice in general, though it can give us points, has nothing for us compared to almost any theatre on the Continent, where the use of the voice is more studied, where the tone has more range, the breathing more freedom, and the vowels more purity.

The acting of social comedy is the best thing about the English theatre. But what it gains in charm and humor and psychology, it often lacks in style; it is rarely smart or elegant or vivid. And it takes its quality not so much out of any talent for acting as out of the gently ordered social sense, the introspection, whimsy, individualism, the cranks, the droll egoists, of the life it portrays. Outside this single field of their comedy, English acting is poor compared to almost any of the Continental. It has no style compared to the French; no realism compared to the Russian; no warmth or translucent actuality, no beautiful fluidity, no magnetism, compared to the Italian; no lyrical fervor, romantic flexibility, and swift clarity of results compared to the Spanish. For our actors the English theatre has a few pleasing and personal

and more or less negative benefits; but from it we can acquire little that is fundamental in the art of acting. In any fundamental sense we have already what the English have. The English actor has very little of the vitality, the physical and mental animation, the style, the magnetism, the free and flowing rhythm, and a kind of poignant impulse and passionate eloquence of humanity, that are the sources of a great art of acting.

In the directing of plays the English achieve more unity, a better ensemble, than we do; but in this the Russians or the Germans are infinitely superior. In décor the English theatre has, of course, Gordon Craig, though it remains to be seen just how important and inclusive Gordon Craig's ideas will come to be regarded in the theatre of the next fifty years. But however that may be, there is no need to go to England to learn from him. One might as well go to Corsica to study military tactics. For Gordon Craig we go to Russia or Berlin or Vienna, and even at home we have more of him than in London.

For the English their theatre is not, in any profound sense, racially expressive. Among them the developments of government, of morals, of sports and of private religion and sects, command a great and absorbing interest. The arts of poetry and of social living have also for a chosen few a deep and old interest. And all these have found means for the expression of themselves. But it cannot be said that the English theatre covers or includes English life to any wide and deep extent. And what is more, far from finding itself expressed there, the English nature mistrusts the theatre. There is something still in the mass of Anglo-Saxons that is hostile to the very stage itself. This hostility and mistrust began long before the days of the Puritans but it came to a head under them, and it has never quite died out. It feels that at best the theatre is a place for mere amusement, that it is wicked and flippant or inconsequent. This prejudice the settlers of America brought with them to our shores. For it is a significant fact that in a country that was so exciting, so adventurous, so dramatic and so free as ours, there should have been even up to this time so little real expression in dramatic form of our life. Other more artistically gifted races have helped us past this limitation somewhat. But so far as the art of the theatre is con-

cerned, the strain of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers in us is more inhibitive than otherwise; the Mayflower harbored no Muse among her passengers, and such brave barks as touched Virginia's sands brought with them gods of pleasure and eloquence but not of the theatre. The teaching of our brave and pious forefathers turns us away from what might be one of the greatest means of expression for American life.

And with this mistrust of the theatre, which persists to such a degree in England and — in the provinces especially — among us, goes another fact. The English do not take the theatre seriously. The most interesting and distinguished people in England have not often been devotees of the theatre. London does not take the theatre seriously as Moscow does, where the fervor and warmth and speculative intensity of the Russian life are carried to the play and where the activity of the soul is continued in terms of a living art. London does not, like Madrid and Rome and Milan, take the theatre seriously by taking it naturally, taking it as a part of the day, a thing like love, food, daylight, that one accepts as a matter of course, a place where whole families sit together, children grow up out of their nurses' arms, and the day's life is renewed in an easy and vivid and moving embodiment of it. These countries, and not England, will influence us, if any can, to give the theatre a more genuine and necessary place in our life.

And, finally, there is only one kind of influence of one art on another that has any significance, that makes sense when we talk of it. It is an exact parallel of the influence that one man has on another. If one man merely tries to imitate another, copies his walk, his clothes, his personal mannerisms, he ends by being very silly and negligible. But if he discovers in another man qualities that he admires and a way of taking life that seems to him admirable, he may with advantage cultivate in himself these qualities and these modes of approach to experience; and through what he learns thereby he may be enabled to express his own life with more beauty and success. An influence in art works in precisely the same way. The influence of any theatre on ours will depend for its health on one thing, the extent to which there is an understanding that our theatre seeks for its uses certain qualities and modes of expression that will enlarge its significance.

An influence that appears in the shape of borrowed names and plots and novelties is of small importance. On the Continent there may be qualities—the exact and vibrant realism of the Russian temperament, for example—that we might possibly learn to recognize in ourselves and to bring into our drama. There may be certain modes of treatment—German expressionism for example—that may seem to dilate for us the region of dramatic expression. There may be directions of mentality—say the French ability to create a character that is at once the type and the individual—that may show us new ways of observation. There may be habits—such as the Spanish way of passing at will from prose to verse and back again—that may help our theatre toward relaxation and flexibility of mood. Or there may be physical endowments—the Italians, for instance, whose bodies are such lucid and vigorous mediums for their ideas—that may remind us of the importance of muscular coördination and gesture and magnetism. But the English theatre affords us opportunity for little beyond colonial tradition and imitation.

But leaving aside any particular theatre or country, the one main issue, obviously, in the American theatre is that it develops a medium of expression that can embody American life. The important thing is that we find for ourselves in the art of the theatre a real dialect. To perfect this dialect our theatre may borrow from any in the world. But when, through its own labor and evolution and through the contributions of other theatres, the American theatre has developed this medium adequate to its ends, nothing else can be done for it. Nothing further of any significance can be added to it. Except superficially, through mere imitation or theft, there is no influence that can help beyond this point of acquiring a medium of expression. After that the quality of our theatre will depend on the quality of the life that it expresses.

STARK YOUNG.